

Traversing the Millenium

By diggs421

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just an experience...

1. Untitled

The dust from the road still covered my shaggy face. I could taste the grit while it was grinding between my teeth. In the distance the fading rays of the tangerine sun lingered across the emerald-green, Florida Everglades. I was smiling like a kid in a candy store! We had finally made it. My friends and I had finally arrived at the New Year's extravaganza in the swamp at the Big Cypress Seminole Indian Reservation. The event was hosted by none other than the notorious band called Phish!

I had always envisioned myself seeing the Grateful Dead on New Year's, unfortunately the death of Jerry Garcia ended my dream as well as many others. My love for another band, even Phish, would never come close to the surreal adventures I had come to share within the circus world of the Dead. However, like the legendary Arabian bird which lit itself on fire, from the ashes of the Dead culture arose the Phoenix that is Phish. Their music called to me, the scene was filled with Ex-Deadheads and newbie Phish-heads, and once again I had a place I felt at home. It was a happening. Everyone who was down with the scene was welcome, and here in the swamp it was no different.

After Eight hours of sitting in traffic, on a road which was normally a forty-five minute drive, we made it to our campsite. Throwing up our tents in a hurried fashion, we quickly settled in to our new home and the set about exploring the "City in the Everglades." Extraordinary! The beaten fields were filled with hacked out avenues of animated shops, freshly painted boardwalks, white-trimmed Ferris wheels and other sensory delights. The Red Forest was one such place, where in the inky blue night of the Florida bayou a small patch of cypress turned into a bizarre drum circle, while in the twisted faces of the trees hundreds of vermillion red spot lights illuminated the glistening sweat of the weaving bodies below.

The dirt roads were transformed into "Shakedown Streets," which were a carnival of enigmatic vendors and nomadic shopkeepers. The multicolored tents lined the thoroughfare to a parade of assorted items such as hemp woven belts, assorted candies, two-for-a-buck lighters, psychedelic candles, sandal-wood incense, fiercely colored gypsy scarves, prismatic arrays of glow-sticks and other such oddities. Of course the black market wielded its wares as well. Occasional shouts of "Who's got my nugget?" and "Hash!" peppered the crowd. Sometimes a crusty character might slide by and whisper "acid" or "ecstasy," leaving behind a lingering patchouli fragrance in their trails. Big Bongos, blown-glass bubblers, patchwork hookahs and Pyrex pipes were hawked by both young and old alike. The old generation hippies, whose bifocals and horn-rimmed glasses came from another age along with their faded jeans and iron-ons from decades gone by, to the new generation Phish-heads with their Ray Ban sunglasses and precisely tie-dyed shirts. Everything was negotiable and all sales were final, mostly because you would not find the wily merchant again in the crowd.

Trading virtually anything was not a problem, and at any hour of the night some cheery red-cheeked and most likely inebriated `Head might rumble and stumble on the by and ask if you were selling anything. Hagging voices sometimes broke the din, while others carried on their transactions in hushed tones. All in all, everything was as it should be. Not once did I see an unhappy face; amazed, smiling, awed, dazed, content, amused, laughing but never a frown.

The next morning began with a scrumptious meal of pan-fried eggs, plump links of smoked sausage, fat and crispy bacon sizzled butter brown with a hint of black edge char, and a nice tall, cold glass of milk, which included the white, frothy, bubble-filled mustache for free. My friend Clay and I scooped our stuff (enough gear to last the night, i.e., extra shirt, disposable camera, two very large bottles of water, etc...) and headed for the gate of the concert grounds. After hacking the hacky-sac for a couple of hours, the crowd started to thicken up around the gate. We halted our aerial ballet with the beanbag and claimed our place at the front of the line. Like a herd of cattle, the crowd shifted in anticipation. The crowd swelled to over eighty thousand strong in little more than an hour. Catcalls and whistles filled the air, as police on horseback trotted over to the metal barriers. From where I stood or rather squatted it was about two hundred yards to the main gate, where staff would stop us for a second time and waited to check bags and wristbands (tickets were exchanged for wristbands when concertgoers arrived). A great cry arose as we surged forth while staff members made futile and awkward attempts to slow the swarming horde down. I was running as fast as I could. My Birkenstocks were fairly near flapping off my fettered feet and my bulky blundering backpack bounced brutally on my big broad shoulders. I streaked past slower Phishheads to arrive breathless at the main gate; once again first in line.

The Security Staff told us that it would be a two hour wait, and instructed us to go back to the parking lot. Hundreds of watery eyes turned to look at one another tightly packed together like sardines as far as one could see, and then promptly commenced laughing hysterically. We spent the next hour and a half heckling the surprisingly friendly horse patrol and gate security. We, at the front, also took the time to appreciate the horse's large bowel movements (which were greeted by squawks of protest and raucous laughter), and the fact that we would be able to see where we were stepping when the time came to march forward.

This was it! The man in the big yellow hat with the megaphone walked up with his all important walkie-talkie, and announced to the Gate Crew to get ready. Then, he lifted his bullhorn agonizingly slow and said with a dry sarcastic timbre, "Okay, people, let's just try to make this as orderly as possible! Wait until the horses are out of the way, please!" My bulbous bag had already been checked, and I strained at the front of the line for the event personnel to liberate us.

For the second time that day I ran like a man possessed. In the exaggerated distance, the vast empirical stage loomed, framed by massive black speakers. On the sides of the performance there were booths of all shapes and sizes, but to me it was all a peripheral blur. My sight was locked onto the primary objective, the place I needed to be.

Three hundred yards left, and I was bounding past the slow of foot like a cascading antelope caught in the fervor of escape. Two hundred yards; my breath was ragged and my face becoming haggard, as my dry tongue leaned on cracked lips. I kept thinking how I needed to work out more often. I saw tie-dyed sprinters take an early lead, only to slow down wheezing or fall to the sweet earth clutching their sides and gasping in time to their bellowing, chugging hearts. Even though I paced myself, when I got to the soundboard I found myself losing steam. One hundred yards; I mustered the nerve for a quick glance behind, I was rejuvenated to find I was ahead of the pack. With that epiphany, and a final surge of adrenaline, I trucked the last fifty feet to, at last, come to rest at the Promised Land: the front row.

I looked around in exhaustion, "Clay! Clay! Over here!" I shouted hoarsely while waving a weary arm. He looked at me and grinned as he began to wind his way through the worked-worn bodies of collapsed runners. I took him in as well as the brothers and sisters around and smiled, then I looked where I was and the smile on my face turned to plaster.

Chris Koun

Enl 3310

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